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ABSTRACT

The use of a folklore unit in a high school English class is described. The major activity of the unit was the student's individual folklore project. For two weeks prior to the unit and throughout a week of introduction on aspects of folklore, each student worked at home on an individual folklore project. Among the aspects of folklore discussed were: Modern Urban and Suburban Folklore, Black Folklore, Children's Folklore, Folk Music and Politics, and How a Man Becomes a Myth. Each student project included an oral presentation to the class, a written analytical essay of the material collected, and either a taped or written collection of the material gathered. Each project was evaluated on the thoroughness of the collection, the insight into folklore expressed in the essay, the style and form of the project, and the interest level and thoroughness of the oral presentation. This unit served to bridge the gap between the subject of English and some student underachievers. (DB)

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Folklore: A Bridge Over Troubled Waters

CAROL SOLOMON[1]

Mrs. Solomon sets up a very ambitious claim for folklore and supports it with evidence of the creative activities of her students.

MANY STUDENTS FEEL no connections with the traditions of society or with the life styles and traditions of past cultures as reflected in literature of past periods. A study of folklore, I have found, becomes a bridge over these troubled waters. Careful collecting and recording of folklore and sharing collections with the entire class shift the focus of attention to oral communication and its relationship to the printed word.

In addition, a study of folklore, which includes a collection project, involves considerable independent, creative thinking to plan the methods of collecting and recording material, and to analyze the material in a meaningful, organized manner. In both the collection and analytical phases, the student synthesizes skills and concepts from a variety of disciplines, e.g. social studies and science.

Thus a folklore unit presents a unique opportunity (1) to renew student connections with their nation's past, their ethnic heritages, and their parents; (2) to develop increased respect for their own folkways; (3) to recognize the intimate connections between literature and oral communications; and (4) to draw upon concepts and skills acquired in a variety of subjects.

In this unit, I moved from lectures to discussions to listening exercises to readings in folklore. The major activity, however, was the student's individual folklore project. After defining basic terms, I centered each day of the introductory period on an aspect of folklore which might appeal to a large number of the students. Among these aspects were: Modern Urban and Suburban Folklore, Black Folklore, Children's Folklore, Folk Music and Politics, and How a Man Becomes a Myth.

Urban and Suburban Folklore

Is folklore alive and thriving today? In the lesson on Modern Urban and Suburban Folklore, we explored this question and

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reached the conclusion that folklore is indeed very much with us today and, in fact, bears many similarities to older folklore. As people have adapted themselves to a new style of living, their folklore has taken new forms. Many of these new tales and legends are reactions against commercialism in our society; old types such as the perverted proverb are being reborn as the altered ad. Often, as with older myths and legends, these new tales try to explain the inexplicable. Most of these tales have a possibility of being true which makes them palatable to the cynical. To evolve some of the above generalizations, we discussed examples provided in the articles "Some Thoughts on the Modern Legend" and "A Note on Altered Ads" in *Journal of the Folklore Society of Greater Washington*, 1971, vol. 2, no. 2. Students also contributed examples familiar to them, and we noticed the numerous variants for these tales. We concluded this lesson by postulating theories as to how tales spread and how variants spring up.

Black Folklore

Why does America have a less unified folklore than other nations such as Ireland and England? The primary factor affecting the diversification of American folklore is the multitude of ethnic groups which have settled in America bringing with them fragments of their old folklores. The American Blacks constitute one such group. In our second lesson, we read and listened to examples of Black folklore from slave days to modern times, noting throughout the discussion the impact Black folklore had had on other strains of modern American folklore. By contrasting older tales with more modern tales, we discovered that as Negroes have become more confident, militant, and urban-oriented, their folklore has reflected the change. A folklore study can therefore have many sociological implications and can help us understand better the differences between ethnic groups. As part of this lesson, we listened to Black comedians Bill Cosby and Flip Wilson using some traditional motifs in their routines. Helpful references for this lesson were Roger Abrahams, *Positively Black* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970) and Richard M. Dorsen, ed., *American Negro Folktales* (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Premier Book, 1956).

Children's Folklore

Who cannot recall a dozen jingles, taunts, or songs used when he was a child? Of all the lessons, the one on Children's Folklore seemed most popular with the students. Some of the students investigated tales and songs recalled by their parents and compared those tales with others they knew. It became evident in our sharing and discussion of childhood jingles, taunts, and tales that children's folklore has unique characteristics. Among the conclusions reached

by the class were that an understanding of children's folklore and games can help an adult understand the child; that children display a love for rhyming and nonsense words – perhaps because they are at an experimental stage in language development; and that children's folklore can endure for hundreds of years. Background materials which assisted me for this lesson were Iona and Peter Opie, *Lore and Language of School Children* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959) and Paul Gump and Brian Sutton-Smith, "The It Role in Children's Games" in *The Study of Folklore*, ed. by Alan Dundes (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1965).

Folk Music and Politics

Folk music seems so innocent. How can it be used as a regulator of politics? We discovered that folk music can be related to politics (1) by the people as a means of protest against the government or any established authority and (2) by the government or power structure to regulate the attitudes of people under its control. We examined tales of both types, focusing much of our attention on the traditional propaganda techniques used in these songs. Two sources which aided me in provoking discussion were Barbara Dane and Irwin Silber, ed., *The Vietnam Songbook* (New York: The Guardian, 1969) and Betty Wang, "Folksongs as Regulators of Politics" in *The Study of Folklore*, ed. by Alan Dundes (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1965).

On Becoming a Myth

Real life people frequently serve as the starting points for mythic figures. How does a real life man become a myth? I offered the case of John Chapman who became Johnny Appleseed as an example, extracting some of the excellent conclusions from Robert Price's masterpiece *Johnny Appleseed: Man and Myth* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1954). The individual who is incorporated in folklore usually possesses idiosyncrasies which set him apart from other individuals. Stories usually emerge about this man during his life time and become so widespread that it is very difficult to distinguish truth from fiction. Eventually the process of idealization and abstraction begins, during which he becomes less a person than a symbol. Frequently printed versions of popular tales further stimulate the growth of more tales. We centered our discussion of this topic on modern people who are main characters in today's myths and legends, people such as Agnew, JFK, and Marilyn Monroe. We also shared anecdotes about these individuals contrasting the images projected by them with what we knew of their real lives. Finally, using examples from literature, studied in class whenever possible, students wrote paragraphs con-

trasting the lives and legends of historical figures such as Lincoln, Washington, and Daniel Webster.

Throughout this week of introduction and for two weeks prior to the unit, each student worked at home on an individual folklore project. Each project included an oral presentation to the class on an assigned day, a written analytical essay of the material collected to be handed in the day of the presentation, and either a taped or written collection of the material gathered. This was the most exciting part of the unit as students followed their personal interests and frequently drew upon other members of their families as informants. Although I suggested a list of thirteen different projects and offered possible means of analysis, in general the materials collected, the methods used for collection, and the conclusions reached showed considerable ingenuity and independent thinking.

Among the projects were these:

(1) Either on a tape recorder or in standard collecting form, collect jump rope jingles and jingles from other children's games and taunts. Use as many different sources as possible. Then in an analytical essay comment upon the similarities and differences in tone, complexity, subject matter, and purposes of these jingles.

(2) Collect tales or superstitions from the "old country" which immigrants still tell here in America. In your essay discuss how they reflect the different culture in which the immigrants were born.

(3) Collect examples of modern superstitions. Using books on the topic, investigate the origins of these superstitions and the purposes they serve.

(4) Using the author's material and critical books when available, discuss the use of folklore in works by one of the following authors: Mark Twain, Washington Irving, Ben Franklin, Nathaniel Hawthorne, William Faulkner.

(5) Collect religious tales and jokes not included in the Bible. Classify them in your essay and discuss possible reasons why these tales evolved and what purposes they serve.

Each project was evaluated on the thoroughness of the collection, the insight into folklore expressed in the essay, the style and form of the project, and the interest level and thoroughness of the oral presentation.

One of the many outstanding projects was one focusing on gestures and vocal tone in the oral expression of children's songs. The student, Judy Zdobysz, coordinated her own films and tapes of kindergarten children singing some of their favorite songs. In her essay, she described her observations in vivid, perceptive

comments such as the following about "The Animal Song."

> The facial expressions of the children are beautiful in this song. When it comes to the part where there is the sound of each animal, the children not only imitate the sounds of the pet but also its actions. For the rooster, heads are tilted back and the children try to sing as loud as they can. For the dog, a stern look covers their faces and the bow-wow is said in sharp, biting phrases. As they chant meow-meow their eyebrows and heads go up, giving one a clear vision of the cat when it is hungry . . .

Another outstanding collection was a group of fifty-seven Girl Scout songs complete with illustrations which was collected and analyzed by Susan Bedient. Her project captured the essence of scouting and reflected a thorough understanding of folklore. In her conclusion, Susan sensitively wrote:

> Thus the scout has founded a folklore appropriate to her needs. She can express herself in methods understood by all; she has only need of a voice and possibly a guitar, and she can give to friends an invaluable treasure, her songs. These songs have been and will be passed from girl to girl, kindling new flames which give understanding and a common bond to all who feel its warmth.

With the help of this unit, I was able to bridge the gap between the subject of English and some of my underachievers. One student who had many problems and seemed completely turned off by English and by school in general, devoted his project to his favorite hobby—modern square dancing. His presentation consisted of a square dance demonstration complete with a caller and amplified music, and in his written report he traced the origins of square dancing from the slaves to today's square dance clubs popular with teens throughout the nation. The positive reinforcement of this boy's classmates after his presentation gave a needed boost to his ego.

Another generally apathetic student created a unique project — a look at the "political" use of folk songs in a neighborhood elementary school. He divided the songs into two basic groups, those created by the administration and faculty to instill school pride and self-discipline in the children, and those invented by the children rebelling against the "tyranny" of the school.

The results were thrilling! The textures and colors of the students' lives were on display and how impressive they were! We ended the year on our figurative bridge with a greater appreciation for each other, our heritages, and the forces which help shape literature.

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